
Remarks by John J. Sweeney, President of the AFL-CIO, National Press Club, on the Senseless Slaughter of the Good American Job
January 18, 2006

Thank you. I'm honored to be with all of you today in this prestigious forum.

The American labor movement is the only organization that speaks exclusively for working families, and I thank the National Press Club for inviting me to amplify that voice.

There is no shortage of issues facing working families in our country.

We're in a consuming warp of national disagreement in which one heated question flows like hot lava into another.

How do we clear a storm of corporate and governmental corruption that should never have been allowed to gather?

How do we stop the packing of our courts with judges whose views on workers' rights and civil rights should have disqualified them from even being considered?

Indeed, what is the right way to conclude a war that was started the wrong way in the first place?

These are all huge issues that compel confrontation.

But we're facing a question of even greater magnitude that is being ignored by leaders of one party and avoided by leaders of the other. And that question is: "What are we going to do about the destruction of good jobs in our country -- the jobs that for the past half century helped us create the largest middle class, the most dynamic economy and the strongest democracy in the history of the world?"

Headlines from recent months chronicle the destruction.

From the *Washington Post*: "Consumer Prices Increase, Outstrip Wages."

From *Reuters*, "China to Service United Fleet."

Another from the *Post*: "Trade Gap Ballooned in October."

A cover headline from *The Economist* warned: "Danger Time for America."

A headline from the *Associated Press*: "Tough Times Ahead for Middle Class Worker; Manufacturing Jobs Vanishing From Our Shores."

From the *Wall Street Journal*: "Growth in Medical Cost Slows As Firms Shift Tab to Workers."

And another from the *Wall Street Journal* carrying the counter-intuitive headline, "Wal-Mart Urges Congress to Raise the Minimum Wage." The Wal-Mart CEO said the company was urging the long-overdue federal increase because, and I quote, "Our core customers aren't making enough money to spend enough money."

Finally, the *New York Times* weighed in with a story we already knew was coming: "U.S. Poverty Rate Was Up Last Year." It was the first time on record that household incomes failed to increase for five straight years — and that record includes the Great Depression.

That Depression followed the only other time in modern history when the White House, the Supreme Court and both houses of Congress ALL were controlled by one anti-expansion, anti-working family, anti-union political party.

Our country was headed in the wrong direction then, so we took back control and charted a new course that spread the wealth and regulated the excesses of big business.

It is time to take control again.

Of course, headlines can't tell the full story, but they effectively capture it. And if I could write a headline for the story I want to tell today, it would read: "The Senseless Slaughter of the Good American Job."

We hear and read a lot about the violence in our cities, and the word most often used to describe it is "senseless" — the death of a young man here in Washington, DC over New Year's was characterized in the media as "senseless."

It seems to me we should use the same language not just to describe wanton acts of physical violence, but also to depict the violence being visited upon working families and our communities by the killing of good jobs.

The senseless slaughter of the good American job has been going on for the past 25 years.

It's at the core of a corporate-driven strategy to compete in the global marketplace by degrading work and workers, rather than competing through ingenuity -- competing through privatization, deregulation and de-unionization rather than by innovation.

Since 1985, the global labor force has effectively doubled, with the entrance of 1.4 billion new workers from China, India and the former Soviet Union. And in the absence of new rules to prevent it, corporations have pitted the new workers against American workers in a merciless race to the bottom.

The result has been a perfect storm of outsourcing, off-shoring, tax evasion, lay offs, work speedups, wage cuts, health care cuts, pension cuts, shifting risks, bashing unions and short-changing communities. It is a storm that has swamped the boats of middle class workers and destroyed the frail crafts of ethnic and immigrant workers.

New York Times writer Louis Uchitelle describes with great clarity how we 've come to this state in his new book, *The Disposable American*, due out from Knopf in March, and I quote:

“Far more than in the past, America lives with a chronically floating, low-wage workforce, one that would not exist if the deterioration in pay and training, and the acquiescence to layoffs, had not made inroads into the dignity of work .”

The failure of our national leaders to preserve and create good jobs is tattooed on the souls of 30 million workers who, Mr. Uchitelle explains, were involuntarily displaced from their jobs from 1981 to 2001.

But wounded workers aren't the only casualties of the corporate job-killing strategy. It is also a self-destructive strategy because it leaves businesses with consumers who don't have enough money to spend or save.

It leaves government with more demand for public services and subsidies ... and fewer taxpayers to pay for them.

And it leaves employees frustrated and distrustful of their employers, fearful for their future.

For a capitalist democracy that runs on equal parts hope, self-sufficiency, innovation, productivity and civic participation, the corporate-driven strategy of destroying good jobs is worse than senseless.

It is just short of suicidal. And we have no hope of changing it unless we confront it.

In just a few days in his State of the Union address, President Bush will present a far more rosy picture of our economy and the situation for working families in America.

He will likely say what he said to the Chicago Economic Club two weeks ago, when he bragged: “The American economy heads into 2006 with a full head of steam the American consumer is confident.”

But what if he told the American people the truth? What if he said: “Our country is headed in the wrong direction. The wrong direction on jobs. The wrong direction on health care. The wrong direction on retirement security. And the wrong direction on education. You know it and I know it, and it's time to do something about it.”

President Bush won't do that, but if I were President of the United States, I'd use this State of the Union speech to cement my place in history.

If I were President, I would admit to the joint session of Congress that we're barely creating enough new jobs to match the growth in our workforce — and increasingly, the jobs we *are* generating are dead-end alleys.

I'd remind Congress that our trade policies have translated into over 2 million lost manufacturing jobs ... just since 1998, our debt to other countries is rising by more than \$1 million a minute and almost \$700 billion in U.S. Treasury notes are held by China alone.

afforded as much protection as corporate interests in all present and future trade agreements.

I'd propose making it illegal for companies to buy or sell merchandise or services manufactured or provided under sweatshop working conditions. And I'd help working people in other countries rise above their burdens by telling Congress we're going to lead the world in effective assistance and debt relief to developing nations.

I'd demand the repeal of our tax laws that encourage corporations to send jobs overseas. I'd call for a bill mandating that all goods and services paid for with tax dollars at any level be produced or provided in this country.

And I'd challenge Congress to quit stalling and pass universal health coverage this year so our workers can live secure lives and our corporations can compete in the global marketplace.

If I were president, I would tell corporate America it's time to re-join our national community by investing more in workers and less in their executives.

I would give Congress a budget doubling the money we are spending on job training and education, a budget restoring the dreadful cuts in our college loan program.

And I would tell them to get busy and give hope a chance by raising the federal minimum wage.

If I were President, I would expose the 150 major U.S. corporations that are using the bankruptcy courts to abandon their commitments to provide guaranteed pensions to the workers who have enabled them to grow and profit.

And I would follow presidential tradition in my State of the Union address and introduce a special hero --- a flight attendant who's been flying with United Airlines for 28 years and counting on a pension payment of about \$3,000 a month to add to her Social Security when she retires five years from now.

A backroom deal cut that pension payment to \$1200 a month and now she's threatened with further wage and benefit cuts at a time when her CEO is being assured total compensation of more than \$50 million a year.

My hero's name is Cheryl Burns, and she's with us today — a living example of what's happening to good jobs and American workers. (recognize Cheryl Burns)

Finally, if I were President, I would ask every member of the House and Senate to sign on as a sponsor to the Employee Free Choice Act, which guarantees the freedom of America's workers to come together in unions and bargain for a better life.

It will stop American employers from taking advantage of our laughable labor laws to destroy the unions that keep our middle class healthy and growing. It will make it possible for workers to join unions and add their voices to our campaign for the good jobs that guarantee economic equality and a strong democracy.

And then, my friends, my brothers and sisters, we can get on with the job of turning this country around.

Of course, we don't expect President Bush to do any of those things. But we do expect more from our elected leaders in Congress, and we're going to demand it.

We also know we have to expect more and demand more from ourselves.

And we know that to change the course of our country, we not only have to think outside the box of corporate control our nation has been trapped in, we have to get rid of the box.

Some may doubt that we have the capacity to do that because of the tragic split that took place in our movement last year. To twist a phrase made famous by a previous Presidential Administration ... I would urge everyone to watch what we're doing -- and not what the doubters are saying.

Two years ago, we took a major step toward changing our country's direction when we founded "Working America," our community affiliate for workers who don't have a union where they work. "Working America" is the most significant innovation our movement has undertaken in decades, and in its first year, we signed up 1 million members who wanted to fight for change as a part of the AFL-CIO.

Last year, Working America members worked hand-in-hand with our collective bargaining members to defeat Social Security privatization, and in November they helped break the bonds of exurban county politics to bring home a win for Tim Kaine in Virginia.

Last month, Working America launched a new online "Job Tracker" that allows its members and the public to discover not only who's sending our jobs overseas, but which companies are violating our health and safety, environmental and labor laws.

By the end of this year, "Working America" will have 2 million members and it's helping us build the broader and more powerful movement we need.

We're also investing \$50 million in our National Labor College so we can train our leaders of the future.

And we've stepped up our [Voice@work](#) campaign to expose employers who interfere with workers' right to form and join unions. And in December, Voice@work put 60,000 people on the streets -- our biggest mobilization in 15 years -- to speak out for the right of workers to choose to join a union.

Today, the Employee Free Choice Act has 208 co-sponsors in the House, including 10 Republicans, and 42 in the Senate -- and we *will* pass it while George Bush is in office.

If I were President, I would sign it.

At our convention last July, we made an historic decision to increase our emphasis on helping new members organize so we can build the strength we need and working families deserve.

More and more of our unions are running aggressive organizing programs and we're seeing the results in successes like the Communications Workers victory for 16,000 workers at Cingular Wireless just since July.

This campaign shows what happens when employers respect workers' freedom to have a voice on the job, and the organizing being done by our unions shows just how determined we are to increase our strength in our workplaces and in our nation.

We also decided to devote more resources to legislative and political advocacy and to fold up our election-cycle model and replace it with a new grassroots program that works year-in and year-out to build a vibrant movement and hold our elected representatives accountable.

We used our new model last November in California -- and we damn near "terminated the Terminator."

This month, we used that new capacity to let our members know "who's on our side" by issuing detailed "report cards" on the voting records of members of Congress.

And we're taking our fight to break out of the corporate box to the state level.

You saw the first crisp punch in that fight when we overrode Governor Ehrlich's veto of our "Fair Share" health care legislation in Maryland.

We've decided to break free from the gridlock of Washington and the hammerlock of national corporate health care lobbyists by launching "Fair Share" campaigns in more than 30 states. We need a simple national health care plan that covers everybody — the failure of Bush's complicated Medicare prescription drug benefit demonstrates that. But if they won't give us a fair health plan covering all families in all 50 states, we will "give them hell" in all 50 states.

We're also breaking out of the corporate box by expanding our work with student activists and our other allies to pass living wage initiatives on campuses and in cities nationwide -- and by mounting campaigns in 26 states to increase state minimum wage levels.

More than 7 million workers would get a raise if the federal minimum wage were increased from \$5.15 to \$7.25 an hour. But we're not waiting any longer for Congress to find its conscience.

We believe Members of Congress need to do more than find their collective conscience, they need to break out of their own corporate box by rediscovering their ethics and reconnecting with the people they were elected to serve.

We're challenging our elected officials on both sides of the aisle to change the laws regulating lobbyists, and change the rules governing their own behavior.

And once they clear away the corporate clatter, they'll be able to hear the voices of working families and get our country back on the right track.

Someone once said, "There are two things we must give our children. One is roots and the other is wings."

When I was growing up in the Bronx, our family and our church provided the roots, and my dad's union

and brother and me.

Unions are also the wings for our communities and for our entire way of life, because we help guarantee a level of prosperity for everyone, because we fight the abuse of corporate power, and because we provide a real voice for workers in politics.

The AFL-CIO and our unions are committed to be the wings of hope for working families and for America, and we will continue to spread them wide on behalf of good jobs, fairness and economic and social justice.

Thank you and God bless all of you and your families, and God bless America.

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